

Remarks to the Symposium on Breakfast and Learning in Children

Senator Tim Johnson

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It is an honor and privilege to be with you this morning to discuss some of the issues facing our kids as the next century draws near.

As members of the child nutrition community, your continued advocacy for effective school nutrition programs is extremely important and I commend the Department of Agriculture for hosting this symposium.

I applaud all of you who come to Washington to ensure that we in Congress and our friends in the Administration understand the importance of our child nutrition programs.

School breakfast is one of our nation's best tools for the advancement and education of our schoolchildren.

Meals for Achievement

With that in mind, I would like to share with you my thoughts on school breakfast, and in particular, legislation I introduced, the Meals for Achievement Act.

My legislation is intended to expand the school breakfast program in elementary schools with a pilot program authorized by Congress last year.

Most Americans agree that education should be a high priority for Congress. As you know, Congress has discussed a variety of efforts intended to improve the readiness of children to take their place in America's workforce in order to secure our place in a strong economy.

However, for the United States to compete effectively in the world, we must have an educated and productive workforce. In order to have an educated and productive workforce, we must prepare our children to learn. In order to prepare our children to learn, they must be well nourished, and that begins with a good breakfast.

Now, I still believe, as I know many of you do, that the ideal is still for children to eat breakfast at home, eating together with their families. But, more often than not in today's hectic paced world, with both parents in the workforce, this does not happen routinely.

This change from years past has a very real consequence for our kids. The best teachers in the world, with the best standards, cannot teach a hungry child.

A child who begins his or her school day with their stomach growling because they either did not have time to eat breakfast or there was no breakfast to be served, is simply too distracted to focus on the lessons being provided by the teacher.

As America enters the 21st century, we cannot afford to allow a single child to be left behind. As Robert Kennedy wrote, "We need the best of many - not of just a few. We must strive for excellence."

We owe it to our own national interest to work hard toward excellence for all our children - education is central to that effort and a nutritious breakfast for elementary children provides the bedrock for achieving this excellence.

The Meals for Achievement Act proposed to provide school breakfast at no charge for all children in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. The school breakfast pilot projects authorized by Congress last year stem from this legislation. These pilots will assess the relationship between school breakfast and learning in six school districts.

More specifically, they will evaluate whether providing breakfast to all children in elementary school increases academic achievement.

As you are well aware, we feed 26 million children in the school lunch program while the school breakfast program only reaches 7 million children each day.

It is my firm belief that if we move forward to make school breakfast available to all elementary schoolchildren, we can remove the stigma that accompanies eating breakfast at school and we will be able to reach many more children who are at risk of not reaching their own God given potential.

The Administration has asked Congress to set aside \$13 million in funding for continued school breakfast pilots during FY2000. I will work in Congress so we can honor the request and I am pleased that I can tell you that I will be joined by a large bipartisan group in the Congress to expand the school breakfast program.

As a matter of fact, approximately two dozen members of the House of Representatives recently wrote to the House Agriculture Committee on Appropriations expressing their support for continued school breakfast pilots.

I have also been joined by a number of my colleagues on the Senate side who have written to obtain funding and provide breakfast for our schoolchildren.

Meals for Achievement - Backed by Academic Research

It is important to note that the wisdom of enacting this initiative is backed not only by our grandparents' common sense, but also by solid academic research at the University of Minnesota and Harvard Medical School.

In 1994, the Minnesota legislature directed the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning to implement a universal breakfast pilot program integrating breakfast into the education schedule for all students at six schools.

The evaluation of the pilot project, performed by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota, shows that when all students are involved in school breakfast, a significant increase in learning and achievement results.

The elimination of the stigma of a subsidized meal increased participation from 12% to at least 75%, ensuring that all students begin the day on an equal nutritional footing. One student remarked "I think it's good because everyone is the same now."

The provision of an effective school breakfast improved learning readiness causing one teacher to remark, "I really notice the difference this year. Last year I saw improved concentration, this year I see less aggression and improved attitudes."

Of perhaps greatest importance, test scores in reading and math went up when school breakfast was provided. These learning skills are a prerequisite for our information and computer driven age.

Researchers at Harvard and Massachusetts General Hospital studied the results of universal free breakfast at one public school in Philadelphia and two in Baltimore.

Their study found that students who ate school breakfast showed great improvement in math grades, attendance, and punctuality. The researchers also observed that students displayed fewer signs of depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, and other behavioral problems.

The areas included in the Harvard study were very low income. Combined with the results from the Minnesota pilot program, these results strongly suggest that expansion of school breakfast shows great promise across a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Meals for Achievement - Backed by You

In addition to backing from the academic community, this initiative also has the support of a broad range of organizations. I very much appreciate the support of the American School Food Service Association, American Dietetic Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, and a long list of others who agree with you on the importance of expanding school breakfast.

What next?

While the expression of support from this broad background is encouraging, it means nothing if we do not act. If we are serious about improving our education system in America, as I know you are, we must first prepare our children to learn.

The time has come to build upon the pilot programs in Minnesota, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other cities, and integrate school breakfast into the education day, at least at the elementary school level.

The Meals for Achievement Act does not mandate the school breakfast program. A local school can still decide whether to participate, and each parent can decide for themselves whether to have their child participate.

I do appreciate that there is a cost involved with this initiative and, therefore, we may have to phase it in over a few years.

But we shouldn't become discouraged if it takes the next several years to enact this change. The time has come to set the course for our future direction in the School Breakfast Program and continue to move forward.